

Marion Barry 1978 Mayoral Primary Campaign Oral History Project
Interview with Sterling Tucker
Conducted on September 5, 2017 by Betty King

Sterling Tucker was the first Chairman of the DC Council after the establishment of Home Rule in 1974. He was one of the candidates for Mayor in the election of 1978. He came to DC in 1956 to head up the local chapter of the Urban League, a job he performed with great distinction. He was a tireless crusader for civil rights, especially the desegregation of Washington, DC, and for Home Rule. He was a member of the DC Council which was appointed by the US President prior to Home Rule.

BK: Today is Tuesday, September the 5th. My name is Betty King, and I'm here with Sterling Tucker, the first chairman of the city council after Home Rule, and Warren Graves [who worked on Mayor Washington's campaign in 1978] is also sitting in with us. Thank you very much for agreeing to talk with us – we appreciate it – for our oral history project. You're not a native Washingtonian, I don't believe, are you?

ST: No, no. I came here in 1956, in October.

BK: From?

ST: Akron, Ohio. Well, I came here from Canton. My home was in Akron, but I was in Canton. So, I came here from Canton, Ohio. Came here to head the Washington Urban League.

BK: So, you were head of the Urban League from '56 until you went into the city council?

ST: Yes.

BK: So, you were there until January of '75.

ST: Yes, I was head of the Urban League here. Yes.

BK: The changes from '56 to '75 must have been absolutely extraordinary.

ST: Really.

BK: And I imagine that you and the Urban League played a big part in it.

ST: It was the ideal place for me to be in that period. I was in Canton, Ohio. I left Akron. I was in my early twenties then. And I had gone to the – I was considered kind of a fair-head young guy coming along in the Urban League movement, kind of a little ahead of the movement a little bit. Not radical, but for the Urban League I was a little radical. But, then-executive director of the National Urban League, who appreciated me – and it's very interesting, because he befriended me, and of about a hundred executives, he kind of befriended me. He had come to Akron to speak once and he took me under his wing. Well, I'd been in Akron then for a while, and I'd made a pretty good reputation there and it was kind of understood that I'd be going somewhere.

But I remember that he was going to be going to India. He had come back, going to speak, and he said to me, "You're going to be offered executive directorships in four places: Cleveland, Columbus, Canton, and the assistant directorship in New York, in the New York Urban League." He said, "But I hope you would accept the one in Canton." And I said, "You're sending me to Siberia." He says, "Well, several reasons." He said, "One is that your –" Alloyce, my wife, he says that "it's a good way to wean her from her family", because he knew her family was there. And so, he said, "That's not far from Akron so that you can be there weekends and summers and so forth. It'll also give yourself time to get your feet wet in an Urban League of your own, and where you can learn and make mistakes and so forth."

So, I did go to Canton. It was a great thing to do for me and for my family. I had one daughter at that time. I was there for four years. By that time I did a lot of stuff nationally, in the National Urban League, and I was in the civil rights movement nationally. So, I began to make a reputation for myself nationally. So, one night, the

assistant director of the National Urban League came to Akron to speak, and he came down to Canton to spend the night with us there. It was only thirty miles away. And I said to him that, "Maurice," I said, "I have a call from Lisle Carter at the Washington Urban League." Lisle Carter, who later became the president of UDC [University of the District of Columbia], and Lisle was the director of the Washington Urban League. "And he wants me to come to be interviewed. There's a vacancy there and he wants me to be interviewed."

And Maurice, who's assistant director of the National Urban League, said, "Well, I don't know why. Washington's already made the decision about that position." And I called Lisle and I said, "Lisle, I understand that —" because I was supposed to have dinner with him the next night in Washington — "I understand the decision has already been made. I don't want to go on a courtesy interview." He said, "Well, they have tentatively, in-house, made a decision, because they've been interviewing people. They've interviewed a fellow from Philadelphia. But I asked if they would interview one more person before they finally made a decision, asked if they would interview you." And I said, "Okay, because I don't want to be coming down there on a courtesy interview." So, I came to Washington Sunday night, had dinner with Lisle Carter. Really fine guy. And we talked, and he told me why he wanted them to interview me. So, I met the next morning with Mort Leibowitz and members of the board; our friend, Jones, who was a doctor at Howard; and John Duncan; Walter Washington. They were all on the board of the Washington Urban League. I met with them that day. In the morning, we had a breakfast meeting and we met for several hours. Canton had a larger staff than Washington had. Canton had twice-a-size budget as Washington had.

BK: No.

ST: Yes. And in Canton, I didn't have to raise any money. In Canton, the United Way would decide on – the business community would get together and decide what the goal was going to be, and anything they didn't raise, the business community put that money in, so they always raised their goal. In Washington, so I came and – but I remember talking to Mort Leibowitz, who then had a number of department stores. Small stores, Morton Leibowitz, he had – I can't remember what the names were now. But he was on the board of the Washington Urban League. Very fine guy. And he said, "Well –" because when I was at the airport leaving Canton to come here for an interview, I got a call from the president of the United Way saying, "Sterling, whatever Washington offers you to come there, we'll pay you to stay here." And moving is always expensive, you know. You lose money in the first year of a big move like that. "We'll offer you the same thing to stay, whatever they offer you." So, I came down, but Mort Leibowitz said, "Well, we can't pay you what – we can pay you," he said, "but we'd like to work out a deal with you where we'll give you a percentage of whatever you raise." And I said, "Oh, we don't do business like that in the Urban League."

BK: No, I don't think so.

ST: And I said to him, "I'm going to raise so much money that I'd be embarrassed to take it." That's what I said. "I'm going to raise so much money here."

BK: There's nothing like being young and self-confident. (Laughter.)

ST: Yes, that's really what it was. I said, "I'd be embarrassed to take it, this money beyond my salary." (Laughter.) I really said that to him. It seemed to me like a very normal thing to say. I just saw all kind of opportunity for work here, further afield, my kind of

work. It was a sleepy town. Like we opened up the department stores. If you [were black and] tried on something there, you owned it. And you couldn't eat in the coffeehouses, in the department stores. You couldn't do that. You had to go uptown to do that. Outside of government, there wasn't a great deal of opportunity, and in the Washington government, there wasn't a great deal of opportunity. We didn't have John Duncan on the Board of Commissions then. That was before his time.

BK: Yeah. I mean, our masters up on the [Capital] Hill were deciding who was going to get jobs.

ST: Oh, yeah. Walter Dobriner, who was chairman of the board of what we call the city commissioners, Dobriner was a very fine guy and he wanted to do things. And so, we were talking about getting a human rights commission. But he was afraid to meet in City Hall to talk about it because he didn't trust the people in City Hall. We met at the old Willard Hotel. We'd go there for breakfast to meet with him to talk about how to organize a civil rights/human rights commission for the District of Columbia. So back in those days, Martin Agronsky [prominent journalist], who was on my board at the Urban League – and so he convened a breakfast meeting at his home, of heads of all of the airlines that came into Washington, and we'd talk to them about integration of the airlines industry. He laid down law to them. They were afraid of Martin Agronsky. He was a big name. So, we did that.

Through other departments – this isn't what we're talking about, but I'm going to take a minute for a little background of that period. But in the department stores, the Urban League, we organized what we call a day of abstinence in all department stores. Wednesday before Easter was a big day in shopping for Easter in Washington in those

days. So, we got much of the white clergy, much of the black clergy. We carefully planned a campaign over a period of months. So, on that day, in their collars and clerical garb, in all the entrances to the department stores, they had clergy people there saying to people, said, well – boycotts were illegal and we couldn't do boycotts. So that's what we called it –

BK: They were illegal?

ST: Illegal.

BK: I mean, what about the First Amendment, freedom of speech?

ST: Yeah.

BK: Forget it, huh?

ST: Yeah, forget it. So, we had called it a day of abstinence, not a boycott. So, we were going to show them – we put pressure on them. So, as we – during that day then, as people would go to shop, the clergy people would say, “You must have forgotten, brother. You must have forgotten, sister. Today is a day of abstinence.”

BK: Brilliant.

ST: Said it very nice, and they said, “Oh, yes, I forgot, Reverend. I forgot.” They would embarrass you for being there. At six o'clock that evening, Berny Burgunder, who was the president of Kahn's at that time, Kahn's Department Store, called me. He said, “Sterling, you win.” So, we got together and we started – that's when we began opening up the department stores and everything. So, we had to open up everything. Everything had to be opened up.

BK: Now, what year was this?

ST: This would have been about 1959 or '60. And just one thing after another. Just opened up everything, one thing after another. There was no black partners in law firms or any – none of that was here at that time. But all the issues in the school system – schools had just been desegregated, but real problems. And we had – oh, boy. But it was lots of fun, a lot of work.

BK: Oh, I should say. So, when Marion came in the sixties, you probably met him at that point.

ST: Oh, yes. Yes. We opened up Pride. David Rusk, whose father was the secretary of state, David was on my staff in the Urban League. And Marion wanted to organize the Pride [the youth employment and training program]. And then Willard Wirtz was the secretary of labor under the federal government at that time. He liked the idea but didn't trust Marion. So, we met with him, and he wanted Urban League to be involved. And, of course, Marion and I were friends from the time he came here. So, what we did was we put Dave Rusk with Pride, this white upper-middle-class guy, Stanford graduate.

BK: Father is secretary of state.

ST: Father is secretary of state. He's going for a PhD. But we got David. David just walked in my office one day and wanted to work at Urban League. So, David went to help set up Pride, oversee the funding, the management of the funds and all that stuff, and we threw him in the middle of that environment. Oh, there's a huge story to be told back in those days about that time. Huge story to be told.

BK: Absolutely. Amazing. Where is David Rusk now? Do you know?

ST: He's back in town. David left here, when he left me he went to head a division of the Labor Department in Albuquerque, and then he became the mayor there. Became the

mayor of Albuquerque, and then he later became a kind of expert on urban development and became the national consultant in that area. He had a private firm that he did that for years, but he's back in Washington now.

BK: Were you and the Urban League involved in the push to get the Home Rule charter?

ST: Oh, yes. At one time, I was chairman of the Home Rule Commission.

BK: Were you?

ST: Yes, indeed. I worked very hard on Home Rule. I remember when meeting with some people in the Congress, we were talking about it and there was Republican there. And when it looked like we might get Home Rule, they said, "Now, who might make up the city council?" They said, "Well, Julius Hobson [chairman of the Statehood Party and member of first Home Rule Council], could he be elected? Could Marion Barry be elected?" (Laughter.) They were naming these kind of guys and they were afraid. Yes.

BK: That made them very nervous, Marion and Julius.

ST: Oh, they were very nervous about those guys. I said, "Well, I don't know, but it'll be an election. And if they can convince the public, well, they could be elected."

BK: Now, were you involved in the school – well, the school board was the first election.

ST: At that first election, was the school board.

BK: And were you involved in that?

ST: I didn't run for it, but I was a part of the helping to get all that set up and organized. Yes, very much so, yeah.

BK: And you were never a member of the – or were you a member of the appointed city council?

ST: I was.

BK: That's what I thought. You and John Hechinger [prominent DC business owner].

ST: Yeah. In the first go-round, I was not. Walter Fauntroy [later non-voting delegate from DC to the US House of Representatives] was the appointed vice chair in the first council, and John Hechinger was the first appointed chair.

BK: Oh, he was the chairperson.

ST: Yeah, the first one. Then when Nixon came in, then Republicans soon came in right after that. Gil Hahn was appointed the chair by Nixon of the council, and I was appointed vice chair of the council. That was about a year after Home Rule, when the Republicans took over the presidency.

BK: And during that period, Congress is working on the Home Rule charter.

ST: Working on the Home Rule charter.

BK: Which came into effect with the election in 1974.

ST: Seventy-four. And there were a couple of issues there that were critically important. A lot of tough issues. One was whether to have an elected chairman of the council or whether to have the council elect the chairman. [Congressman] Charlie Diggs was chairman of the Home Rule Commission. Well, Charlie Diggs was, in the Congress, chairman of the House District Committee, they called it at the time. And Charlie Diggs, in Michigan, the council elected their chair, so that's what he proposed doing, and the House had agreed to that. I had some questions about that and I talked to Charlie Diggs about that, and I talked to the chairman of the committee in the Senate.

The Senate would want to do an elected, have the council elect its own chair. But when I talked to Charlie Diggs and I talked to the Senate committee people, the Senate's already given in to the House. But then Charlie changed his mind. I said, "We elect so few

people here,” then. And the school board, in those days, had so much trouble electing a president of the school board, it would go on for about a week, and we didn’t want that to be the case on city council. And I’m glad that we made that change. There were some other changes we made that had been proposed, we had an opportunity to influence in all that.

BK: Oh, that’s great. So, the charter passes.

ST: Yeah.

BK: And you decide to run for the chair.

ST: I did.

BK: And who opposed you in that? Who were you running against? It was a partisan election, so there was a primary.

ST: Yeah. Marion considered it, and, of course, he’s chairman of the school board at the time. And then he changed his mind. He decided he wouldn’t run for chair, he’d just run for council. So, he ran an at-large seat on the council. So, I had no opposition in the Democratic primary.

BK: Oh, you ran unopposed.

ST: I ran unopposed.

BK: Was there a Republican – of course, Green Party didn’t exist.

ST: No, they didn’t exist then. No.

BK: But Statehood Party, any?

ST: No. No Republican ran.

Warren Graves: No, there was a guy named Phillips. I know his daughter, Mary Phillips. He ran in the Republican primary. I think he won.

BK: What was his first name?

WG: I don't remember his first name.

ST: In the first Home Rule election?

WG: I think so, yes.

ST: I don't remember that name.

WG: I may be wrong, but I know that he ran for chairman of the council at some point.

BK: Well, in any case, you essentially slid into office without – I mean, you had such stature at that point in the community.

ST: Yeah. Well, that's the Democratic primary, but then the general election, a person who worked in Walter Washington's government ran against me. I can't remember who he was.

BK: I wonder who that was.

WG: For chairman?

ST: Yeah, he ran for chairman. There was a faction that said the leaders of whom first government ought to be all Washingtonians, and I'd been here all those years and all that involvement.

BK: But there's huge sensitivity here about the difference between native Washingtonians and we carpetbaggers. Doesn't matter how long you live here.

ST: Yeah.

BK: You've lived here for fifty-one years, but you're still a carpetbagger.

ST: Right. And I endorsed Walter Washington in that election, but he didn't endorse me for chair, because this person was on one of his programs. And Walter Washington didn't want to –

BK: I wonder who that could have been.

ST: He ran along with Jimmy Jones and that group, one of those programs. I can't remember his name now. He did oppose me in the general election.

BK: I mean, it wasn't Joe Yeldell or somebody like that.

ST: No, it wasn't a big name at all. It was somebody that worked down in one of the special youth programs that Walter Washington had. He wasn't regarded as a major candidate.

BK: And did he run as a Republican or as an Independent?

ST: No, he ran independent.

BK: How interesting.

WG: Yeah, I don't remember that.

BK: So now you've left the Urban League, and you are now the chairman of the council.

ST: Yes.

BK: And you all were making it up as you go along.

ST: Yeah.

BK: I mean, everybody thought the world was our oyster, we could conquer everything, didn't we?

ST: And the Congress was as nervous as they could be.

BK: Absolutely. And Julius [Hobson] and Marion both got elected.

ST: Yeah. Well, a lot of blacks and whites in the community didn't want Home Rule, because they were very comfortable with the federal government. And they weren't sure about Home Rule. They said, "Well, I can vote back where I came from." I said, "But when's the last time you voted there? How long you been there?" They said, "Thirty years." So, we had opposition. The most vociferous opposition was the Board of Trade,

of course, because they, with the House District Committee, controlled the city, and there were staunchly opposed to Home Rule.

WG: Was the Federal City Council active back then, and where they influential?

ST: Quiet. Quietly so. They didn't seem to get into politics.

WG: But they did everything behind the door.

ST: Yeah, they functioned pretty much behind the scenes, as they do now.

BK: Now, the Federal City Council then, was that black and white and –

ST: No, no blacks.

WG: Just white.

BK: All white?

WG: All white.

ST: Oh, yeah.

BK: And the Board of Trade was essentially all white as well.

ST: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

WG: The black business group was the Chamber of Commerce.

BK: Yeah. Well, I know that, but I wasn't sure whether the Federal City –

ST: Yeah.

BK: That's interesting.

ST: And the black community had a strong real estate community here because of the segregation, but they couldn't call themselves Realtors, they called themselves realtists.

BK: They couldn't call themselves Realtors?

ST: No.

BK: They couldn't get licensed?

ST: No, they couldn't. They could be licensed to be a realtist, but not a Realtor. You had all these distinctions.

WG: Flaxie Pinkett in there.

ST: Because they weren't in the white – in the real estate community. See, because housing had been segregated, and so the white people were the Realtors and blacks were the realtists. (Laughter.)

BK: Amazing. I mean, I knew that the doctors and the dentists and so forth had a black association and a white association, but I hadn't realized that – wow, I don't know.

ST: And of course, you had the Citizens Association, which is white, and the Civic Association was black.

BK: And all of this prevailed still in 1974, when we got Home Rule.

ST: Oh, yes, yes. And one of the things I was concerned about Home Rule was, frankly, because Washington was one of the best organized communities of the country, as far as I was concerned, as far as the citizens were concerned. And when I came here and I found all that good structure here – although it was segregated, both in the white and black communities, it was a very active community in that regard. And the one thing that I was concerned about Home Rule was – because Don Nelson, who was [in Congress] from Wisconsin or one of those communities that –

WG: Wisconsin, yeah.

ST: Yeah. He was a very good guy and was working hard against Home Rule.

BK: And on the Senate side or the House?

ST: The House side. And he wanted the Advisory Neighborhood Councils, which they had back in his state, out of concern that it's going to disrupt all this organization that we

already had here. And that would allow these people to just go home then. But he wanted that other level of government put in there.

BK: Your observation, forty-three years on, do you think that the Advisory Neighborhood Commissions did disrupt – in some cases disrupt that? Do you think that that extra layer was beneficial?

ST: Well, it practically disappeared, that layer. It is to some degree in some neighborhoods, those associations –

BK: The Civic and Citizens Associations?

ST: But a lot of people did just go home, and another group of people kind of took over. The difference is – and there are lots of problems with the advisory neighborhood groups, and I've been to lots of them, is that lots of them are little political fiefdoms, so you've got three or four people who control the neighborhoods now, and that's too bad. We don't have that involvement that we had in the whole community that we had before. It was not just – they were not interested in political things, but people were interested in their neighborhoods as communities. Not as leaders, but as communities. And we don't have that sense of community to the degree that Washington had. It was a great sense of community here, a great sense of community.

BK: That's very interesting.

WG: Betty, I know you mentioned about the story which talked about the people up on the Hill were concerned about Julius Hobson and Marion Barry getting elected. Well, in that first election, you had four people who were just real activists. You had John Wilson and Marion Barry, you had Julius Hobson and Doug Moore. So, you had these activists, really, who had been active in the community, who got elected to the –

ST: Well, can you imagine that first council? Ward 1, Dave Clarke, who was no shrinking violet. You had John Wilson in Ward 2. You had Polly [Shackleton] in Ward 3, who had whole lots of good experience.

BK: Now, Polly had been on the appointed council.

ST: Yes, she had been. Polly had been on appointed council. In Ward 4, you had Arrington Dixon, who was okay. Then in Ward 5, you had Bill – what was his name? Very quiet guy.

BK: Spaulding?

ST: Spaulding, yeah. That's right. Six, you had Willie Hardy.

WG: No, Nadine Winter.

ST: Seven, you had Willie Hardy. Yeah, and then 8 you had –

WG: Coates?

BK: Wilhelmina Rolark.

WG: No, James Coates.

ST: Coates was then the initial – the first council, then Coates and Wilhelmina came along. Then at large, you had Marion, Doug Moore, Julius Hobson. Boy, that's some council.

BK: And who was the fourth at large?

ST: Jerry Moore.

BK: Jerry Moore, that's right. He was a Republican.

ST: Right.

BK: He was the sole Republican.

ST: That's right. So, can you imagine the brand-new council? And one of the first things, some of them tried to go behind the scenes, led by Marion Barry, was how to strip the chairman of his authority.

BK: (Laughter.) Of course. Of course, he wanted to do that.

ST: If you're organizing a council, how to strip the chairman of his authority.

BK: Particularly to make appointments to committees and stuff.

ST: Oh, yeah.

BK: But that persists to this day, I think.

ST: Yeah.

BK: I think you've defended that well.

ST: So, I said to them, "You know, I don't want to embarrass you, but the authority of the Home Rule --" well, they wanted to strip the chairman of a vote. The chairman of the council vote only in the case of a tie. And I said, "Well, I don't want you to be embarrassed, but the Home Rule Act gives the chairman a vote, and I wouldn't want to have to raise that in a meeting where we're organizing the council." Well, they thanked me for that, really. I said, "I don't want us to be embarrassed right off the bat." I said, "We have that vote." I said, "But aside from that, the chairman only has the authority that the council gives him, because the council makes its rules. But the only authority it has is votes that was equal to yours."

BK: Oh, so the council gave the chairperson the authority to appoint the committee chairs.

ST: Yeah. Well, but what they do, they have to vote on it. The chairman makes the recommendations. Now, the authority -- it's not authority you have, it's influence, because everybody wanted to be on the committee or wanted to be the chair, and Marion

wanted to be the chair of this and Dave wanted to be the chair of that. And I said – so, I mean, that’s how you’d rotate those things.

BK: Oh, no. Of course. I mean, it’s a political process.

ST: Political process, right.

BK: But I mean the council –

ST: Yeah, that’s the only way they could see they could do it. In other words, unless they gave the chairman some authority, they couldn’t be organized. You know what I mean?

BK: Right. Exactly. (Laughter.)

ST: So, then they tried to find ways to control that authority. For instance, Marion was trying to figure out how to control the agenda of the council.

BK: Those first few months had to have been like herding cats, right?

ST: But you know what? I couldn’t do that today, but I was young and excited and interested.

BK: We all were.

ST: Yeah, that’s right.

BK: We all were.

ST: To me, those were just challenges. Those weren’t stumbling blocks.

BK: No, no. Of course not. But, you know, and we had great faith that Home Rule was going to be a lot more home ruling than it actually turned out, but it was an exciting time.

ST: Yeah.

BK: It was making it up as we went along.

ST: Yes, really.

WG: When you guys were organizing the first-elected council, did you lean upon your experience with the appointed council? The rules and things like that, did you adopt any that you had used before?

ST: Well, we didn't ignore it, because I had been on both councils, and so I saw the weaknesses and strengths. What we were trying to do was we looked at lots of city councils, how they were organized. We were a little different. We were a city council, a state legislature, and a county council. So, we had to think – and a whole different way of thinking.

BK: Yeah, there isn't a parallel anywhere, I don't believe.

ST: Nowhere. Nowhere. So, now, how do we make sure we make use of the authority that we have under the Home Rule Act? I mean, how do we become a strong legislative body with whatever authority we had, so something to build on? So, we couldn't just organize like a city council, because we were three levels of government.

WG: So what support did you get from the universities in the city or nongovernment organizations? When people get elected to Congress and to councils and things now, I think the GW [George Washington University] take the newly elected council members in and put them through orientation. I mean, who did the orientation for all of the new members of the first-elected city council?

ST: Well, really, we – well, there was the National League of Cities, one, and then there was a – which was Then there was a legislative group in the National League of Cities that we could call upon to do – but we did a lot of research on our own, and we made comparisons of one form of government to another. But there was no model for what we are, you see.

BK: No, there isn't. No, anywhere.

ST: So how do we – and if we would ignore some of the authority that we would have as a state legislature, then there was a vacuum there which had been filled by the mayor or somebody, you see. So, we had to be very careful that we made sure the council's authority was pretty well outlined and pretty much –

BK: Yes, because the District administers all the federal programs that go to states.

ST: Yes.

BK: So that's a very fine line and you've got to deal with the federal regulations on the grants and so forth, and at the same time craft your own – it's a huge challenge. I hadn't really thought about it that way.

ST: It was really a huge challenge. And remember I said that Walter Washington, we worked together very cooperatively. Very often at night, when the work is done, after six or seven o'clock, he'd come down to my office, I'd go down to his office and we'd talk about things. We'd talk about issues. The main thing we both wanted to do was to try to resolve as many issues behind the scenes, because we knew that Congress was watching us. The city public, we'd not gained their full confidence and trust yet, and so we were mindful of that and I was mindful of that with the council. I would say to them that I'm not going to be a dictator here, but if you have issues, let's come in and let's talk about them. Let's see if we can't work through them, so we don't have to deal with everything out in the public. Let's see how far we can go without violating the public's trust.

BK: And yet, at the end of four years, you decided to run against Walter Washington.

ST: Yeah, I did. I did, because Walter had been appointed mayor for six years and been the elected mayor for four years. Walter was tired. I could see that he had done about what

he could do, in my opinion. And I did it, and we were still friends. I told him about that. Walter and John Duncan had tried to talk me out of it. John Duncan said, "Well, in four years, you'll become the mayor. Why don't you just wait?" But there's a big push out in the city for a change. Big, huge push. And I said to Walter, "Walter, we've had some polls, and our polls say you can't be re-elected." And I said, "So if you insist upon running, then it's going to be a close election, and some of your votes are going to come to me and some are going to go to Marion."

BK: By the time you decided, Marion was – well, of course, Marion started – was very upfront –

ST: Yeah.

BK: – in '76, when he ran for re-election, because he had a two-year term.

ST: Oh, yeah.

BK: He was unblushing about saying that he was going to run for mayor. So, there was no question about that.

ST: Oh, Marion came to the council, we knew Marion was starting to run for mayor. And I wasn't in a rush to become mayor, it just seemed like it's something that I needed to do.

BK: No, I understand. Listen, you had a distinguished, distinguished career in the District. So, Walter must have been delighted that both you and Marion were running, because I think he figured that you were going to split the anti-Washington vote.

ST: Yes. I think that he probably thought he was going to win. More afraid of me than Marion, because I didn't think Marion could be elected. I frankly –

BK: Nobody did.

ST: I think the most surprised person in the world when he got elected was Marion.

BK: No, I don't think so. We, along about end of July, August, really, we – Florence Tate [Barry's press secretary] and I used to sit opposite each other, and we were in the Miller Fur store [campaign office] in just an open plan. And one night in August, when everybody had gone out to the wards to campaign and so forth, I said to her, "You know, Florence, I think we're going to win this." And she said, "You know, I think so, too." We were kind of embarrassed to say it out loud. But there was a passion in that campaign that was amazing.

ST: I think you're right. There was a young group of businessmen too, particularly Jewish businessmen I think, but I think there was a younger group who felt that they wanted in, and that the Walter Washington group mainly had kept them out. The Board of Trade was controlled by an older group of people, the Business Committee was controlled by business organizations. And they saw in Marion Barry an opportunity to a young, bright, and able person to get in. So, I was amazed, the extent to which Marion was able to mobilize support in the white community. That amazed me. That really amazed me, and I applauded him for it.

BK: Listen, it was – when Polly endorsed you, before she announced it, I got a phone call from Marion: "I've got bad news. Polly is going to endorse Sterling." And he said, "What do you feel about that?" And I paused for a moment, and I said, "It's time to cut the umbilical cord." I said, "Your support in Ward 3 is rock solid. It's not going anywhere. Polly is not going to take her ward with her when she goes to Sterling." We had started organizing Ward 3 in '74.

ST: Yes. Ward 3, you couldn't have won it without Ward 3. He didn't win the ward, but he got enough support out of Ward 3 to make him respectable. And then when the *Washington Post* endorsed Marion –

BK: And then campaigned for him by writing three –

ST: Not campaigned for him, took over his campaign. Took over his campaign.

BK: The editorial pages just –

ST: Oh, boy.

BK: That was killer.

ST: Well, here's what I was told after the election was over. I was told that when the *Washington Post* endorsed Marion, that some people from the reporting side of the newspaper said, "What you've done is you've just re-elected Walter Washington."

BK: Oh, really? Because we interviewed Milton Coleman, who was covering Walter, and he never said that. I mean, he may have forgotten.

ST: Yes. Yeah. Well, that's what I got from some of the – that's what they said, the people who were in charge of the *Post*, said, "You've just re-elected Walter Washington." And they said, "Why?" "Because what you've done is you've taken votes from Sterling Tucker that Walter Washington would have had, you see, by taking votes from Sterling Tucker. Then those votes aren't going to Marion Barry – you're taking votes from Sterling Tucker that are going to go to Walter Washington, and you're going to take some votes from –" Well, however they figured it was that helped Walter Washington.

BK: And it may have, because it was a third, a third, a third.

ST: Yeah.

BK: We had just a few thousand votes more than – I mean, it couldn't have been closer.

ST: Couldn't have been closer. Total of 3,000 votes between first and third, a 3,000-vote difference.

SBK: That's right. I mean, it couldn't have been closer. And I think maybe – it was surprising that Walter did as well as he did, so maybe the people who said that the *Post* would swing votes to Walter may have made it possible for him to be so close.

ST: Well, it was mostly – in a way, I was kind of happy when the *Post* did not endorse me.

BK: Really?

ST: I was a little bit, because I thought I was going to win. And in those days, there was a feeling that you needed the *Washington Post* to win.

BK: Nowadays, it's almost a curse.

ST: Yeah, but that day they think you need the *Washington Post* to win, and so everybody was scrambling for the *Washington Post* endorsement. And one reasons you – it was that way because it appeared that the white community particularly relied on the endorsement of the *Washington Post*, because they didn't know the black community very well.

BK: Except in Ward 3, where –

ST: Except in Ward 3.

BK: – Polly was the ward's ambassador to Chocolate City.

ST: That's right.

BK: And, therefore, Polly would have carried great weight.

ST: That's exactly right, except in Ward 3. But a *Washington Post* endorsement doesn't mean as much anywhere in the region as it once did. But at that time, it was a very important endorsement. But after they did it, I thought, well, I'm going to win, then, without the *Post*'s endorsement. When they first endorsed Marion, the first letter of

editorial said – talked about three candidates, about: Walter Washington is tired and needs to be retired, pretty much. Sterling Tucker would be a fine candidate. He has the background, he has the experience, he has the temperament, but we’re not sure that he would be aggressive enough. The kind of issues we have in this city, we may need a person who would be more aggressive than Sterling.

BK: You can’t find anybody more aggressive than Marion Barry. (Laughter.)

ST: And they said that he’s been maturing in office, and so forth, and therefore, they – so they didn’t exactly say I wasn’t qualified. So, I thought, that’s okay. And then when the public said, “Well, what you did is you just re-elected Walter Washington,” and, boy, that took over the campaign – boom, boom, boom, one editorial after another.

BK: Yeah, there were three editorials altogether.

ST: Yeah. Oh, you haven’t heard of that before.

BK: No. Or since.

ST: Or since. They just took over his campaign, and Marion couldn’t believe it himself. So that’s what happened, they just took over his campaign, because they wanted to make sure that Walter Washington was not re-elected.

BK: And even their own polling, the *Post*’s own polling showed that Marion couldn’t win.

ST: Yes.

BK: But it was enormously influential.

ST: But Marion and I had been friends from the very beginning and all the way through. From the time he came here until the time he died, we talked and it was always friendly. I never felt that – Marion was a very smart person in lots of ways and had lots of savvy. And he had lots of faults, and everybody knows what they were.

BK: Oh, he had his demons. None of us –

ST: He had both faults and demons.

BK: – overlook that.

ST: But his heart was right, and he really wanted to do the right thing and wanted to be a good guy. And I knew that. He really wanted to do well for the city, and did a lot of good for the city.

BK: And he did a lot of good, I think.

ST: An awful lot of good. Took us into bankruptcy almost, but he did lots of good in that whole process. So, I – I mean, I was disappointed.

BK: Of course. Of course, it's devastating.

ST: Yeah. But on the night of that election, at about midnight, when it appeared I wasn't going to win – because it took several days before – after that, before, the count was really final, and people told me to ask for a recount, and I wasn't going to do that to our government. But on that night, as a person who was from the White House staff was leaving my hotel room, he said to me – he was very disappointed – he said, “You'll get a call from the president in the morning.” And I didn't know why. And I did get a call from the White House the next morning, asking me to come in and see the president, Carter, at two o'clock in the afternoon. And he said, “Sterling, you were our candidate. We were hoping you were going to win. But we didn't win. But we know how elections are, and we've been holding a spot for a couple of months.” And they asked me to become an assistant secretary at HUD the very next day.

BK: That's great.

ST: Yeah, it was great.

BK: Yeah. He's a great man.

ST: Oh, he was.

BK: And, listen, he knows all about overturning elections of the people who are expected to win.

ST: That's right.

BK: He knows all about that.

ST: Oh, yes, yes.

BK: But he's one of the greatest ex-presidents we've ever had, I think.

ST: He won't be given that credit, but he's one of the finest presidents we've ever had.

BK: Yeah, no, he was great. Was great. I worked hard on that campaign for him, really did. Well, is there anything else you'd like to add? This has been really great. I really appreciate it. It gives me a whole extra dimension to our archive, really, to have your recollections and so forth.

ST: What I'm especially proud of, Betty, is that the government, with all of its challenges, it has survived them very well. And I think we've got a pretty good, sound, and pretty stable local government. We had a good foundation, and I think those who've come along have built on that foundation very well and did real well.

BK: And fulfilled the responsibility of being a super city council because of the state and –

ST: Yes.

BK: – your county, state, and municipality. I mean, that is a unique challenge, as we talked about.

ST: Yes, really.

BK: And I think that probably, to a great degree, based on the groundwork that you did in the first four years, establishing certain norms and so forth. It's really challenging. As city councils go, this city council is fabulous. I mean, every city council has been fabulous. They're much more savvy, much more sophisticated, much less parochial.

ST: I think they see the job ahead.

BK: The dimensions.

ST: On the day of Home Rule, both Walter Washington and I were sworn in by Thurgood Marshall, and we had the swearing-in ceremony on the steps of City Hall, a very cold January day. But as I looked out in that audience, and I thought, how great it is to be standing at the edge of tomorrow. Because that's the way I saw it, standing at the edge of tomorrow, how great it was to be there, be a part of that.

BK: Well, fabulous. Well, thank you very much. Is there anything that you'd like to add?

WG: No, I think we've –

BK: We appreciate your participating enormously.

[End of interview]